

-- Figs. 14A – 14C provide flow diagrams that summarize some of the foregoing embodiments. In Fig. 14A, a method is provided for supplying items to a plurality of dispensing units. At block 1402, a plurality of dispensing units is provided, each holding a plurality of each of multiple distinct items. Each dispensing unit has a processor and a memory for storing a record of inventory levels of each distinct item. At block 1404, restocking information is periodically sent from the dispensing units over a network to a server computer. The restocking information includes a restock quantity for each distinct item. At block 1406, the restock quantities are aggregated over the plurality of dispensing units for each of the multiple distinct items. At block 1408, ordering information for the items to be restocked is generated based on the aggregated restocking information. At block 1410, the ordering information is sent electronically to one or more supplier computers to order items to be restocked into the dispensing units.

B2

At block 1412, the dispensing units are polled over the network using the server computer to obtain the quantities of the items to be restocked. At block 1414, the ordering information is generated using the server computer and supplier information is determined for the items to be ordered. At block 1416, the ordering information is sent electronically from the server computer to an application computer having a hosted procurement application. At block 1418, the hosted procurement application is accessed to view the ordering information on a display screen of a user computer, and one or more pages on the display screen are produced to permit the ordering information to be approved. At block 1420, the ordering information is sent from the application computer to an electronic requisition and purchasing system. At block 1422, one or more electronic purchase order numbers are generated using the electronic requisition and purchasing system and the purchase order number is sent electronically to the application computer. At block 1424, the purchase order number and supplier number are sent electronically from the application computer to a business portal computer, and from the business portal computer to the supplier computer based on the supplier information.

At block 1426, an advanced shipping notice is sent electronically from the supplier computer, to the business portal computer, to the application computer and to the server computer. The advanced shipping notice includes information on items to be shipped, their quantities and a date of shipment. At block 1428, information contained in the advanced shipping notice is sent electronically from the server computer to the dispensing units to apprise the dispensing units of the items and quantities to be shipped for restocking into the dispensing units. At block 1430, at least some of the ordered items are shipped to the dispensing units that are contained in the advanced shipping notice. At block 1432, information contained in the advanced shipping notice is sent electronically from the application computer to the user computer for items that are not stocked in the dispensing units. At block 1434, the shipped items are restocked into the dispensing units. At block 1436, the restocked items are reconciled with the advanced shipping notice using the dispensing unit processor. At block 1438, a confirmation receipt is sent electronically from the server computer to the supplier computers and to the electronic requisition and purchasing system. At block 1440, an electronic invoice is generated at the supplier computer based on the receipt and sent to the business portal computer and the application computer. At block 1442, the electronic invoice is transmitted from the application computer to the electronic requisition and purchasing system, and payment is generated using the electronic requisition and purchasing system.

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In Fig. 14B, a method is provided for supplying consigned items to a plurality of dispensing units. At block 1450, a plurality of dispensing units is provided, each holding a plurality of each of multiple distinct items on consignment from an external supplier. Each dispensing unit has a processor and a memory for storing a record of inventory levels of each distinct item. At block 1452, restocking information is periodically sent from the dispensing units over a network to a server computer. The restocking information includes a restock quantity for each distinct item. At block 1454, the restock quantities are aggregated over the plurality of dispensing units for each of the multiple distinct items. At block 1456, ordering information is generated for the items to be restocked based on the aggregated restocking information. At block 1458, the

ordering information is sent electronically to one or more supplier computers to order items to be restocked into the dispensing unit.

In Fig. 14C, a method is provided for supplying items to a plurality of dispensing units. At block 1470, a plurality of dispensing units is provided, each holding a plurality of each of multiple distinct items. Each dispensing unit has a processor and a memory for storing a record of inventory levels of each distinct item. At block 1472, restocking information is periodically sent from the dispensing units over a network to a server computer. The restocking information includes a restock quantity for each distinct item. At block 1474, an aggregated list of distinct items and their associated quantities that are to be restocked is generated based on the restocking information. At block 1476, a hosted procurement application is provided to permit manual selection of suppliers, manufacturers, and quantities for the items in the aggregated list. At block 1478, ordering information is generated for the items to be restocked based on the manual selection using the hosted procurement application. At block 1480, the ordering information is sent electronically to one or more supplier computers to order items to be restocked into the dispensing unit. At block 1482, desired items and quantities are posted using the hosted procurement application to permit suppliers to provide electronic quotes for supplying the supplies. At block 1484, items that are not on the aggregated list are ordered using the hosted procurement application. At block 1486, suppliers and manufacturers of items carried by the suppliers and their associated prices are posted using the hosted procurement application to permit manual selection of the suppliers and manufacturers. --

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IN THE CLAIMS:

Please amend Claims 1, 31, and 32 so that the pending claims read as follows:

1. (Amended) A method for supplying items to a plurality of dispensing units, the method comprising:

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